

Reading Fluency – The Forgotten Skill

By Marion Hindes

What is reading fluency? Why is it important, and how is it taught?

Fluency is the ability to read aloud quickly, accurately, and with appropriate expression. Fluent readers decode words easily. Therefore, they are free to understand what the text is saying and to make connections between the text and their own background experience. They know how to group words together in phrases and how to read them with proper tone and emphasis. When they have finished reading a selection, they can explain what it said.

Less fluent readers, on the other hand, may spend most of their attention on decoding words. Because of this, their minds are not free to comprehend what they are reading. Other less fluent readers may accurately or automatically read individual words, but they do so without proper expression. This is because they have not yet learned how to divide the text into meaningful phrases. Their reading is marked by choppiness and inappropriate pauses. All of this demonstrates, among other things, a lack of comprehension.

Reading fluency is important because it is the bridge between word recognition and comprehension. It is a key skill that has often been overlooked and under-taught. Research shows a clear link between fluency and comprehension. A large study by the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) (NAEP) in 2002 found that approximately 40% of a representative sample of 4th graders scored poorly in reading fluency. These same students also scored lower in comprehension. If students are not fluent readers, their comprehension typically suffers, and much of the world of literature is lost to them.

Now that we have a clearer understanding of what fluency is and why it is so important, let us explore ways that fluency can be taught.

First, the teacher needs to determine each student's level of reading fluency:

Begin with an easy book, one that the student is not familiar with and has not memorized. Have the student read a page to find out if it is too difficult. (Reading passages of 50 words for primary students, and 100 words for older students are sufficient for testing. Keep a running record as the student reads. On your copy of the student's text, note the number and kind of mistakes made. (You will discover error patterns that you can address later through targeted instruction). Count the number of words read correctly. To obtain an accuracy score, divide the number of correctly read words by the total number of words in the reading selection. If 95% - 98% of the words are read accurately, the book is at the student's independent level. If 85% - 94% of the words are read accurately, the book is at the student's instructional level. If 84% or less of the words are read accurately, the book is at the student's frustration level and is too difficult.

Besides accuracy, rate (speed) is another fluency factor. One reading fluency table suggests the following minimum oral reading speeds for grades 1-5:

Grade 1 - 60 wpm

Grade 2 - 70 wpm



Grade 3 - 90 wpm

Grade 4 - 120 wpm

Grade 5 - 150 wpm

The same table states that, in order to move up to the next reading level, students must be able to read at the rate (wpm) of the next level with 98% accuracy.

Once you have chosen selections at the independent or instructional level of your students, try the following strategies for developing fluency:

- Model fluent reading for your students. Use a variety of genres - stories, speech excerpts, poetry, and fairy tales, especially those with rich, musical language.
- Discuss rate (speed), phrasing (meaningful grouping of words), and intonation (emphasis of important words and phrases).
- Have students echo you as you read a selection aloud, line by line. To teach them more about phrasing, write phrases of the selection on paper strips and use them as cue cards for them to read in unison.
- Have the entire class read the text together aloud.
- Have each student individually read and reread a selection. Offer guidance and feedback each time. Four repetitions are usually sufficient.
- Enlist the help of others to provide feedback - parents, tutors, peers, and audio CDs.
- Try a [reader's theater](#), in which students read their parts from a script. Start with an echo read, then follow with a choral read. After the class has had plenty of practice, choose students for each part. Coach them in reading their parts with proper phrasing, pausing, and expression. Have them look up once in awhile as they are reading. Assemble a few simple costumes and props, and perhaps invite another class to watch.

Research has clearly shown that monitored and repeated oral reading increases fluency and raises overall reading achievement. It improves comprehension. This is true for older, struggling readers as well as elementary students. The research has not been conclusive, as to the effectiveness of silent, independent reading with minimal feedback in improving fluency. This suggests that most independent reading might be better suited as an at-home activity, providing more class time for guided oral reading.

Remedia Publications has several materials well-suited for teaching fluency. The following are some suggestions:

[Comprehension Quickies Story Cards](#) - 40 short, nonfiction stories (65-100 words) featuring controlled vocabulary, simple sentence structure, double-spaced text, and easy-to-read font help build comprehension skills. More than 200 follow-up questions included.

[Beginning Reader Program](#) - This program features an activity book, sight word flash cards, and 10 student readers. With lots of rhymes and repetitive vowel sounds, the readers are ideal for reading aloud.

[Keys to Comprehension Game](#) - Students will master the 6 key skills of comprehension with this award-winning game! Reading Levels 1-5.

